



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Breaking Open the Word First Sunday of Advent C





Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Blessing of an Advent Wreath

Before your group lights the first candle of the Advent wreath, the following blessing may be prayed.

All make the sign of the cross.

Leader: The kingdom of God is at hand.

All respond: Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Leader: Let us call to mind God's mercy and salvation as we wait in hope during the days and weeks of Advent. As we gather around this wreath let us remember God's promise to be with us until the end of time.

Scripture is read. Isaiah 9: 1-2a.

All respond: Thanks be to God.

After a time of silence, all join in prayers of intercessions and in the Lord's Prayer.

Leader: Let us ask God to bless our wreath and to bless us.

After a short silence, the leader prays:

Heavenly Father,

We praise and thank you for the great gift of your Son Jesus, the Christ.

You sent him as a Light to the nations.

You sent him to reveal your Light and Love to a world darkened by sin.

Christ is our hope and our salvation.

Upon him we place all our trust.

He is Emmanuel, the promised Messiah.

He brings wisdom and peace to a troubled world.

Lord God,

bless this wreath and

bless those who gaze upon its light in hopeful anticipation.

Come, Lord Jesus, come in haste, come!

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

The first candle is lighted.

Leader: Let us praise God, the ruler of the universe.

All respond, making the sign of the cross:

The God who made heaven and earth!

The blessing concludes with a verse from "O Come O Come, Emmanuel"

Catholic
**Faith, Life
& Creed**
Version 2.0

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Doctrinal Sessions.

Editor: Bill Huebsch

Published cooperatively by
TeamRCIA.com and
PastoralPlanning.com.

Liturgical Context

- ▶ Advent is a time not just of expectant waiting but of profound renewal.
- ▶ The cosmos joins the cries of human longing for the Christ—the One who came once in history, who comes each week in our hearts and who will come again at the end of time.
- ▶ There is a reminder of the judgment that awaits us all throughout the entire season.
- ▶ The symbolism of the Advent wreath reminds us of the tension between light and darkness. We are reminded of the darkness the earth once knew as it waited for the coming of the Light of the World—the Christ. A candle is lit each week illustrating the gradual increase of the Light that dispels the darkness.
- ▶ The Advent wreath cradles our primary symbols--wood and light. “The wood refers to the ‘living greens’ that are used to make the wreath...The wood or pine embodies the primary symbol of the cross. It is the wood of the cross which will become the sign of our salvation at Easter whereby all are saved by the ‘wood of the cross.’ The four candles represent Christ, the Light of the World!”¹ Four purple candles, or three purple candles and one rose candle [for Gaudete Sunday, the Third Sunday of Advent], or four white candles may be used in the wreath.
- ▶ Mary slowly emerges as a primary character in the unfolding drama of the season. John the Baptist takes center stage as a primary player in the ethos of the season. One can almost hear his ancient cry, “Repent and change your lives!”
- ▶ Today we begin a new liturgical cycle: Year C. We are reminded of the importance of the liturgical year. We are reminded that the entire mystery of Christ is made manifest to us in the liturgical year and that the primary truths of Christian faith are manifested throughout the seasons.
- ▶ Advent prepares us to encounter the truth, reality and dogma of the Incarnation that we will experience at Christmas.
- ▶ We remember three comings of Christ—the Christ who came once in history, the Christ who comes each day in our hearts and the Christ who will come at the end of time.
- ▶ Salvation history is remembered and made present to us in our Advent liturgies.
- ▶ The season invites prayerful diligence as we remember what God has accomplished through his Son Jesus throughout human history, what he is doing now and what he will continue to do in our lives as we go about the business of building his kingdom on earth as we wait in joyful hope for the kingdom yet to come.

¹Linda Gaupin, *Catechesis and Liturgy, Course Text*. 52.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

Reading 1: Jeremiah 33:14-16

- ▶ Babylon invaded Israel and destroyed Jerusalem. The people were taken into exile.
- ▶ Jeremiah strengthens and offers hope to the people who have lost all hope.
- ▶ The author of Jeremiah encourages the hope that the monarchy would be restored as was promised by Nathan when he assured David that his dynasty would last forever.
- ▶ People's hope in that promised began to fade, however.
- ▶ People were becoming assimilated into the pagan culture of their conquerors.
- ▶ They became lax in their Jewish piety, devotion and practices. The prophet feared that people would lose their Jewish identity.
- ▶ Thus, Jeremiah restores hope in the Davidic dynasty and the promise of the Messiah.
- ▶ The future Messiah would restore God's justice to the people and usher in a new age of mercy and salvation.
- ▶ Advent's First Sunday echoes images of light and darkness thus the metaphor of light and darkness aptly captures the move from dark cocoon into the light of new birth for all people renewed in faith during this holy season.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a "brief" story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ How can this reading be a word for you today?
- ▶ We can all fall victim to complacency. We too can flirt with the gods of our own choosing. What gods do we flirt with in our present world that might distract us from our focus of waiting for the rebirth of Christ in our lives?
- ▶ What obstacles in our lives might compel us to become complacent and not remain faithful to God's mercy and action in our lives?
- ▶ What needs to be born anew in your heart this Advent season?

Second Reading: Thessalonians 3:12-4:2

- ▶ The letters to the Thessalonians are the earliest compilation of Christian Scriptures.
- ▶ Paul turned his evangelization efforts toward the Greeks when it was clear the Jews rejected his message.
- ▶ This so infuriated the Jews that they had Paul and his cohort thrown from the city.
- ▶ Paul was as concerned that the Christian community not water down its identity just as Jeremiah was similarly concerned about Jewish cult and custom.
- ▶ Paul feared that Thessalonian Christians would lose their way in the face of persecution. He sent emissaries ahead to offer his encouragement and to affirm the good work already begun and to remind them to remain steadfast no matter the cost and no matter what may come.
- ▶ Paul encouraged steadfast adherence to Gospel values as they awaited Christ's triumphant return.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ Where is the good news?
- ▶ Have you ever been enthusiastic about some venture in your life only to later allow it to diminish in importance? What caused it to diminish? What would it have taken to maintain your original enthusiasm?
- ▶ Some people invest a great deal of time and energy in their conversion journey. As time wears on they often become lax in their enthusiasm and zeal for what initially touched their hearts. They become less faithful to Gospel living. Can you see this possibly happening in your own life? What can you do to safeguard it from happening?
- ▶ If someone were to tell you that it is very easy to fall away from Christ and his Church, what would you say are the reasons for falling away in the first place and what needs to be done to prevent it from taking place?

Gospel: Luke 21, 25-28. 34-36

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?

- ▶ Jesus prepares his disciples for his death. He tells them that he will come again and they will recognize his coming by the cosmic and cataclysmic signs around them.
- ▶ He tells them that frightening though it sounds, they are not to be afraid. Such things mean that their eternal reward is near. If they remain prayerfully vigilant and steadfast they will enter triumphant into the new and holy city as citizens of a new reality.
- ▶ Two issues are of extreme importance in chapter twenty-one: the need to remain vigilant and steadfast in the face of pending persecution and the need for patient endurance as they await Jesus' return.
- ▶ Jesus' disciples will be strengthened by the Spirit to endure whatever befalls them. The Spirit will give them the words they need when dragged before magistrates for their belief in Christ.
- ▶ This section of Luke's Gospel illustrates a profound belief in the resurrection of believers. They are not to worry about the destruction of the body—they will enjoy eternal life with Christ.
- ▶ This section in chapter twenty-one also is concerned with endurance. The Christian mission is no easy task. Faithful discipleship requires diligence, perseverance and a heart and will in complete submission to God's purpose.
- ▶ Disciples are to be ready at a moment's notice for they will not know when the Lord will return. There will, however, be indications of cosmic proportions—political uprisings and disturbances and turbulences of the earth. When these things occur they can expect the Lord to return on a cloud to take them to their final resting place of glory.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ We hardly have to be concerned about being dragged into court for our faith in Christ. However, what are some ways we might be persecuted for our faith? What would be your response to such persecution? How might you prepare for it?
- ▶ Not even Jesus knew the hour or day of his return. Yet we are all called to persevere in the face of persecution and as we wait for his return. When you consider how you approach life throughout your life, how are you in the “perseverance” department? Is perseverance a virtue that is naturally present in your or is it one that must be cultivated? How might you cultivate perseverance? What concrete steps could you take this Advent season to be more of a committed, persevering disciple?
- ▶ What steps might you take this Advent season to become more aware and

participate in the life of Christ who lives within, the Christ who is to come anew at Christmas and the Christ who is to come at the end of the world? What are the implications of this Gospel? What is the challenge?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question. (@ three minutes)

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

Concluding Prayer

Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.
I trust in you: strengthen my trust.
I love you: let me love you more and more.
I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.
I worship you as my first beginning.
I long for you as my last end.
I praise you as my constant helper.
And I call you as my loving protector.
I want to do what you ask of me:
In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.
Let me love you Lord as my God.
And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.
A Christian called to respect and love all those lives I touch.

OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

#1. I can very easily fall prey to the god of distraction---things that keep me from nurturing God's relationship in my life. Sometimes that god is worry. I can get so caught up in worrying about my children and their concerns that I leave no room for God to quell my fears and bring peace to my troubled soul. When I become quiet enough to allow God-consciousness to settle in, worry dissipates and I can trust again. Worry is an insidious monster that gobbles up our attention and at the end of the day spits us out like garbage, having sucked the life right out of us.

There is no value in entertaining it, feeding it or trying to tame it. The only answer is to refuse it any and all access. That is easier said than done. However, prayer and rejoicing is the best antidote. When we fill our minds and hearts with things of God, other gods simply get squeezed out! The challenge is to remember that truth and act on it!

#2. I am very aware that the Christian life can become routine. We can become burned out. It requires diligent attentiveness. Where we invest our energy is where something will grow and develop in our lives. When there is no investment, growth ceases. In my life I have come to discern two extremes that are deadly when it comes to the Christian life—too much pain and struggle and the absence of pain and struggle.

When life becomes so painfully burdensome with one trial after another that one can hardly take one's breath before the next shoe falls, it is very difficult to focus one's attention on things of God. There is a reason Jesus prayed that we not be put to the test. Sometimes the more severe the test, the more I lose heart and doubt has a way to creep into my consciousness. Thus, my prayer is that God not send more my way than I can handle. My mother used to say that God suits the burden to the back. For the most part I would agree with her, but when the load on the back is so heavy that one can hardly pick it up let alone carry it, it becomes very difficult to abandon one's life to God as in truth it seems that God is nowhere to be found.

The other extreme is when there is no hardship at all---life goes on its merry way. It is very easy to forget about our need for God. We delude ourselves into thinking we are self sufficient and that God is not all that necessary to our lives. This is a very real human temptation. I fear our modern culture is hugely influenced by it. I am thankful for the trials in my life as they have helped to make me the person I was created to become. There have been times I wanted to scream like St. Theresa, "If this is how you treat your friends, Lord, it is no wonder you have so few!" There have also been times of utter joy and bliss in the communion I have enjoyed with God. But there have also been times when it has been very easy to forget the Source of my blessings. Balance and attentiveness to my relationship with God and the Christian life is the way I am empowered to stay on course.

3. St. Paul never quoted the historical Jesus. He never met him face to face. Paul's experience of Christ was the risen and exalted Christ, the cosmic ruler of the universe. Sometimes as one author suggests, we are so focused on the historical Jesus and his

mission that we pay less attention to the Christ who rose from the dead and is exalted in glory—who is the divine energy and spark within—who drives the universe. Jesus died on the cross but it is Jesus, the Christ who rose from the dead. Christ, who in his risen, transformed state is the one who graces us, lives within us, and invites us to participate in his life.

This Advent if I do nothing more than consciously become aware of my participation in the life of Christ who dwells within—I have done much to prepare a stable for the renewal of Incarnation that also resides within each of us and gives us our divine dignity and origin. The following reflection that I found on a recent trip to Ireland had a huge impact in bringing that awareness into my life in a more focused way. It is a wonderful Advent/Christmas reflection.

In one of my stops to an ancient Celtic monastery I came across a small travel guide with a spiritual twist. I was profoundly touched by the wisdom of Incarnation expressed by two monks in this little travel guide. An Irish author of intriguing travel guides of Ireland in his book, “The Secret Places of the Burren” tells of an encounter with two men he met during his travels across Ireland. One was a brilliant nuclear physicist and the other a distinguished doctor. Both were in their early thirties, unmarried and both joined contemplative orders. They shared what motivated their decision to join the contemplative order. John Feehan describes how this encounter not only gave him an appreciation of their decision to make such an abrupt life change, but also a glimpse into the meaning of life itself. His description of what they shared touches the very core of life itself and the meaning of our Christian existence.

Feehan describes the basic philosophy from which these men gave up their lucrative lives to spend them in contemplation of God: He said: “The human being exists solely for the purpose of becoming an earthly life form of God... The inner dimension of man should rule his life, and that inner dimension was God. Everything else was a mere side show. One lived a life in practical terms in as close a union as possible with God. One did not do it for a reward. One did it because this is the only rational explanation of life itself, the only explanation that gives meaning to death. The average person on the outside would be inclined to feel that if you take away money, sex, power and success from life you are left with nothing and there is little point in staying alive. The monk sees it differently. All these things are to him transient. As soon as you achieve one you want more and more and each achievement becomes emptier and shallower and brings on more and more stress and tension. The highly successful man in material terms may well be the unhappiest...

The best things in life are those which come from within: creativity, tolerance, living in the present, meditation, contemplation and above all a loving care for all life, not just human beings, but every living thing. A life lived in those terms brought unbelievable happiness”, said the monks. They made an analogy, “A stained glass window looked at from the outside is merely a grayish glaze. But looked at from the inside is a thing of indescribable beauty. If you are on the inside you can experience everything to its fullest.

If we accept the 'inner' life it does not really matter whether or not we are in a monastery---fulfillment of life's purpose will be ours.

Both men are now dead. One gave up world-wide fame, the other great wealth. Neither would concede that they gave up anything. They would contend that they gave up trash for everything. Indeed both were two of the happiest men I ever knew.
(p. 106, 107)

Advent is an invitation to look at the beauty of the stained glass prisms of our soul—of my soul and the souls of all human beings—and see the face of God.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Faith

Eschatology or End Times
Kingdom of God

Salvation

Liturgical Year
Revelation I

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

FAITH

Advent and today's liturgy issues a resounding clarion call to embrace the faith we have been given and to pray for the grace and the strength to grow and develop that faith. Thus, today our doctrinal focus will be FAITH and what the Church teaches about FAITH.

ESCHATOLOGY OR END TIMES

It is an amazing paradox that the beginning of the Church year and Advent fast-forwards us to the end of time. Today Jesus catapults us to the last days and his glorious return. It is a most appropriate time to consider what the Church teaches about eschatology and things concerning the end of time and all we believe about it.

KINGDOM OF GOD

The season of Advent is a time we recall Christ's mandate to build the reign of God in our midst as we prepare for the coming of the Christ. Thus, today we will focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the KINGDOM OF GOD.

SALVATION

The Advent/Christmas season brings salvation history front and center in our lives. We remember the prophets and all that was proclaimed about the Christ. We hear of God's cosmic sovereignty and we celebrate the salvation that is ours through the Incarnation of God's Son. Today we will focus on the doctrinal teaching regarding SALVATION.

LITURGICAL YEAR

Today begins a new liturgical cycle—Year C. The Year of Luke. It is an appropriate time to focus our attention on the theology expressed by what we believe about the LITURGICAL YEAR. The liturgical year sets forth in liturgy God's plan of salvation in and through Christ. The Paschal Mystery of Christ is proclaimed and made manifest in the

liturgical cycle. Today we are going to devote our attention to the mysteries inherent in the LITURGICAL YEAR.

REVELATION Part I

What better time is there than Advent to focus our attention on God's revelation to humanity? Today's session will focus on God's revelation.